The Ties That Blind: The Moral Value (and Disvalue) of Anonymity

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Talk of anonymity is ubiquitous in the twenty-first century. We speak of "anonymous sources" and "anonymous donations," are comforted by "anonymity promises" and "anonymity guarantees," and sometimes agree to speak *only* "on condition of anonymity." We are told that anonymity is valuable, and sometimes indispensible, for securing personal information,[i] enhancing liberty and autonomy,[ii] protecting rights to privacy and free speech,[iii] and even supporting climates of trust and openness. In particular contexts, anonymity is prized for its ability to further the following ends:

(i) to procure information that wouldn't be forthcoming without it (as with whistleblowers, witnesses, and those giving testimony),
(ii) to express unpopular or dissenting opinions without fear of reprisal or retaliation,
(iii) to protect those who are at a strategic disadvantage (as when women apply for jobs in still male-dominated fields),
(iv) to encourage the donation of money and scarce resources, including blood, tissue and reproductive material (gametes and organs),
(v) to ensure fairness and impartiality (as with the blind review of scholarly articles),
(vi) to provide protection from persecution in climates of oppression, and
(vii) to enable individuals to in any way live covertly or reclusively in the social sphere.

However, it is not clear that anonymity is always employed for such noble ends or has such beneficial results. It can subvert more authentic forms of communication and facilitate harms that would not be possible, or choice-worthy, without it. It can promote the promulgation of hate speech, allow identity thieves to get close to their victims, and enable cyber bullies and

harassers to behave irresponsibly on the Internet. Though anonymity is often connected with goods—such as freedom and security—that have proven to be difficult or even impossible to attain without it, we have also seen a sharp increase in subversive behaviours perpetrated under the cloak of anonymity. Harassment and stalking, rudeness and indecency, mischief, deception, gossip-mongering, and the exploitation and homogenization of peoples all thrive better in an atmosphere of anonymity than without it. Because anonymity alleviates accountability and can even provide complete impunity, it is especially appealing for criminals and evil-doers, and can even seduce the average person to act as the morally worst version of herself. Given these tensions, it is unclear whether anonymity is a value worth preserving and, if so, what are the conditions that make it warranted.

This paper has two main aims: one is to understand the mechanisms that allow anonymity to facilitate both good and bad ends; the other is to use this understanding to determine the value of anonymity relative to its disvalue across a variety of moral and socio-political domains. Building on previous work[iv] in which I characterize anonymity by what I call the 'central anonymity paradigm,' I argue here that anonymity is primarily instrumentally valuable as a strategic device to procure some other valued good or set of goods, and is justified derivatively to the extent that it successfully achieves this end. Here, I leave open the question whether anonymity is intrinsically good and, in the final sections, I give reasons why it should sometimes be resisted. My argument proceeds in four stages: first, I describe four domains in which the tensions between the value and disvalue of anonymity can be felt; second, I briefly present the central anonymity paradigm; third, I draw on Kathleen Wallace's taxonomy of three kinds of anonymity (agent anonymity, recipient anonymity, and procedural anonymity) to show how anonymity is typically achieved in the paradigmatic cases, and why it is so effective at achieving

and securing certain ends; and finally, I draw on the concept of "intimate anonymity" from the fields of architecture and urban design as a model for anonymity relations that preserves the individualizing benefits of anonymity—security, privacy, freedom, etc.—while encouraging individuals to form meaningful relations with others that support intimacy, trust and community. I begin with four anonymity tensions.

Four Anonymity Tensions

Anonymity can function to support either purely good, or purely pernicious, ends. It can support fairness in voting procedures, for example, but also allow online stalkers to appear innocuous to their potential victims. However, it is also true that, in a variety of contexts, the very anonymizing mechanisms that produce benefits also *themselves* yield harmful results, raising questions about the true value of anonymity, and about how to isolate anonymity's benefits from its costs, preserving one while resisting the other. Consider the following four examples that reveal a deep tension over the value of anonymity.

1. Anonymity on the Internet

The growth of the Internet, alone, has in historically unprecedented ways made it possible to anonymize ourselves to both good and bad ends. Numeric and non-numeric pseudonyms (such as usernames and PINS), IP addresses, and "ECash" transactions all help to ensure privacy while navigating the web. The Internet also allows us to create online identities, distinct or fractured from our offline identities, which can help those who are oppressed, weak, guilty or victimized to express unpopular opinions, confessions, and revelations in safe spaces. For these purposes, it seems that the "tools and applications to achieve anonymity are more important than ever."[v] Yet, the same technology that protects us from others also helps to create what Martha Nussbaum and Saul Levmore call "the dark side of the Internet," making us more vulnerable to those whose

abuses anonymity makes possible—fraudsters and identity thieves, trolls and griefers,[vi] rumor-mongers and online stalkers. There is also a more general worry that anonymity runs counter to individual needs for freedom and expression, or to the general spirit of the information age in which "[i]nformation wants to be free,"[vii] accessible to all and easily transferrable. Taking this idea further, Diane Zimmerman claims that society has a "powerful countervailing interest in exchanges of accurate information about the private lives and characters of its citizenry".[viii] While unregulated discourse on the Internet arguably enhances freedom of speech, a wholly unregulated Internet has proven to create breeding grounds for offensive conduct.

2. Anonymity and Journalism

In journalism, anonymity has long been employed both to obtain unique kinds of information and to protect the informants who provide it. It is standard practice among British news publications such as *The Economist* to run their editorials anonymously, in part because "collective voice and personality matter more than the identities of individual journalists".[ix] But there is a growing trend among editors, in the U.S. especially, away from anonymously edited material. In August 2010, *The Buffalo News* discontinued anonymous online editing as a way to bring accountability to a practice that often turns "offensive, sometimes reaching the depths of racist and homophobic discourse."[x]

The tension over the value of anonymous speech is felt in the political sphere as well. One view is that information speaks for itself and that "The inherent worth of . . . speech in terms of its capacity for informing the public does not depend upon the identity of its source, whether corporation, association, union, or individual."[xi] Another is that anonymous speech helps to constrain the democratic forces that can marginalize individuals. In McIntyre v. Ohio Elections Commission (1995), the Supreme Court overturned a statute requiring all campaign advertising

to identify the communication's author by name. Delivering the opinion of the Court, Justice John Paul Stevens wrote:

> Under our Constitution, anonymous pamphleteering is not a pernicious, fraudulent practice, but an honorable tradition of advocacy and of dissent. Anonymity is a shield from the tyranny of the majority. It thus exemplifies the purpose behind the Bill of Rights, and of the First Amendment in particular: to protect unpopular individuals from retaliation--and their ideas from suppression--at the hand of an intolerant society.[xii]

While anonymity is often valued for its ability to protect individuals, however, suspicions rise in cases where groups (if they are invulnerable ones) assume anonymity for strategic political ends. During a 2010 speech in Portland, Oregon, President Obama attacked pro-Republican groups who were spending campaign funds from anonymous donors, calling this practice a "threat to our democracy."[xiii]

3. *Anonymity in Health Care*

In health care, promises of anonymity are thought to be important, and sometimes essential, for providing individuals a safe haven for recovery from certain socially stigmatizing conditions, such as alcoholism, or to seek testing for them, as with anonymous HIV/AIDS testing, which has become a particularly controversial practice. While anonymity encourages testing by individuals who have concerns about disclosing their HIV/AIDS status,[xiv] it has also been criticized for allowing persons with AIDS to engage in dangerous, morally irresponsible behavior without accountability and for undermining the need for aggressive public health surveillance of severe illnesses without true cures[xv]).

4. *Anonymity as a Fictional Device*

Finally, consider two fictional examples of anonymity that have driven a wealth of discourse in their respective domains.[xvi] First, Plato's story of Gyges in the second Book of the *Republic* connects anonymity with injustice by suggesting that anyone who is free to be unjust

under the cloak of invisibility would do so. Glaucon claims that, if two men were given rings that would render them invisible:

> Then the actions of the just would be as the actions of the unjust;… And this we may truly affirm to be a great proof that a man is just, not willingly or because he thinks that justice is any good to him individually, but of necessity, for wherever any one thinks that he can safely be unjust, there he is unjust… If you could imagine any one obtaining this power of becoming invisible, and never doing any wrong or touching what was another's, he would be thought by the lookers-on to be a most wretched idiot… (*Republic* 359a-360d)

Though Glaucon assumes that anonymity masks the subversive goals we all naturally have, John Rawls privileged anonymity for its ability to suspend the personal biases that might prevent choosers in the original position from selecting fair principles of justice. The 'veil of ignorance' would create a suspended state of anonymity in which hypothetical choosers are shielded from the personally identifiable information that may bias their decisions.

Across each of these contexts, the very mechanisms that help to create beneficial states of anonymity can also foster morally destructive anonymity relations. Without limits, boundaries or a standard of justification, anonymity can enable shame-free zones in which morally good, but also impulsive and self-interested, behavior can fly under the radar of social constraint. Given this, is anonymity a value worth preserving? If so, is it valuable intrinsically or simply instrumentally as a way to obtain or maintain other values? To answer these questions, we first need a clear understanding of what anonymity is, to which I turn next.

The Central Anonymity Paradigm and Three Anonymity Types

Anonymity is often understood either very narrowly as namelessness (as the etymology of the word suggests) or very broadly as a phenomenon of being in any way unknown. Yet, if we are to capture all of the relevant relationships of which anonymity is a feature but also to delimit

anonymity relations from other that involve unknowability such as privacy relations, I think we need both to free it from a strict identification with namelessness and to specify in what sense it is a kind of unknowability. To situate anonymity between the concepts of namelessness and unknowability, I understand anonymity as the result of a specific exercise of control in which some feature of an otherwise known person fails to be associated with the network of properties that constitute that person.[xvii] Hence, in anonymity relations:

> Some property p of anonymous person A is concealed from B (the potential knower) such that B fails to associate p with A as a well-defined set of properties.

Where the anonymity relation holds, there is (i) a property p that could belong to A, and (ii) a plurality of subjects to whom p could also belong such that B is unable to identify p with A.[xviii] Hence, anonymity does not require that a person's identifying information is withheld from the public sphere; it needs just to be dissociated from the person to whom it belongs.[xix] As such, anonymity is relative to particular networks of properties, on the one hand, and networks of persons, on the other, which allows for the substitutability of the anonymous person with others with whom she could reasonably be confused. As such, anonymity is a state that could not exist apart from epistemic relations among persons or in an epistemic vacuum; rather, it is characteristically interpersonal and relative to particular contexts of knowing.

There are, I take it, a variety of purposes for which anonymity conceived of in this way may be sought (to protect privacy, avoid reprisal, or to enable uninhibited creative expression in oppressive contexts) and many means by which anonymity can be accomplished (some formal, others informal; some chosen, others spontaneous). Since distinct ethical issues may be raised by each of these, I draw on Kathleen Wallace's taxonomy of anonymity types to delimit the general class of anonymity relations into the following three types:

1. agent anonymity (anonymity for the sake of furthering action by the anonymous person, e.g. anonymous donors, authors, bidders),

2. recipient anonymity (anonymity for the sake of preventing or protecting the anonymous person from the agency of others, e.g. anonymizing HIV tests to protect potentially positive clients from stigmatization), and

3. procedural (or third-party) anonymity (anonymity for the sake of preserving procedural integrity, such as to maintain fairness in voting or peer review processes).[xx]

Now that we have a clear sense of the nature of anonymity and its general sub-types, we are positioned to examine the value of each of these kinds of anonymity. I begin by considering the value and disvalue of agent anonymity.

The Moral Value [and Disvalue] of Anonymity

Agent Anonymity

In the examples of agent anonymity that we have seen, anonymity functions in some way to increase the dimension or virility of a person's own agency. This can support beneficial kinds of agency (as with many instances of anonymous donation) but in the harmful cases, anonymity can create a special sort of license to perform moral transgressions we might otherwise resist. What are the mechanisms that create this special license, enabling anonymity to intensify the perpetration of harm?

Surely, one reason is that an awareness of one's anonymity lessens a person's inhibitions, thereby increasing the harm she feels she can get away with. Stanley Milgram's research revealed that allowing people to think that they are not responsible for their own decisions and actions (because, in that case, an authority figure has assumed responsibility) produces irresponsible decisions and actions. We act much worse under the shelter of anonymity, it seems, than when we expect to be made personally accountable. But this only explains why the harms anonymous persons commit go unacknowledged or unpunished, and hence why they can occur,

but not why an awareness of one's anonymity can seduce the average person to act as a morally worst version of herself.

In addition to increasing the harm we can get away with, anonymity also seems to increase the harm we *want* to get away with. In a 1976 study that involved Halloween trick-or-treaters, children arriving at a test house were asked to take only one piece of candy from each person who offered it.[xxi] Those who were alone and whose identities were known (they were not hidden by masks, makeup, etc.) took more than one candy only 8% of the time. However, when the children arrived as a group and their identities were concealed, 80% took more than one candy. Anonymity, it seems, can free us to do what we really want to do and sometimes what we really want is to act worse than we would if we felt the full force of behaviour-constraining social pressures. What we would do well to explain, therefore, is why anonymizing ourselves allows us to see ourselves differently as moral agents, for whom senses of right and wrong somehow lose force.

Recall that the concept of anonymity I am working with frames anonymity as a mechanism that dissociates us from the properties that make us individuals. Since being an individual moral agent means (at least) having the capacity to empathize with close and distant others, and for whom accountability for present actions has a certain moral force, the de-individualizing effect of anonymization makes it less likely that we will motivated by the moral powers we would otherwise have, such as empathy and the social feelings that ground a sense of obligation. The power of de-individuation is suggested by the following fictional example. In *To Kill a Mocking Bird*, Scout happens upon a mob about to lynch an innocent man. When she calls Mr. Cunningham by his name, thereby reminding him of his identity and individuality, he is suddenly self-aware, which defuses the mob's intended violent act.[xxii] So it seems that one reason

anonymity can incline a person to behave as a morally worse version of herself is that it can decrease her awareness of herself as a moral agent, with *her* particular history, debts and obligations, dispositions and commitments, and sense of moral purpose. Because anonymity can fracture us in these ways, and since having integrity is a matter (at least) of maintaining an harmonious and integrated self, it is unsurprising that a lack of moral integrity would accompany states of anonymity.

Furthermore, we are more likely to behave badly when those against whom we are acting are anonymous to us. Real-life scenarios show that, when we cannot fully see the other person—both literally and figuratively—our inhibitions are lessened, and our empathy and compassion are compromised. For example, studies have also shown that the psychological trauma for a pilot who drops a bomb on a city is often less than for a ground soldier who has had to shoot one man at point-blank range.[xxiii] This de-individualizing power can also have a dehumanizing effect by preventing us from recognizing the other as one who ought not be harmed, or harmed in certain ways. Abu Ghraib prison's lack of resources—including translators, sufficient food and clothing, etc.—in addition to the de-individualizing effects of the military, made it easier for the military personnel to treat the prisoners as "the enemy." Not seeing the "others" (in this case, the prisoners) as whole persons made it is easier to treat them as non-persons (as collateral damage, the target, animals, etc.). In general, by de-individualizing both ourselves as agents and those against whom we act, anonymity arms us with greater executive power enhancing not only the opportunity, but perhaps also the desire, to harm others.

These examples show that anonymity is often valued by agents as a strategic device to procure or preserve something else they value (even if the thing they value is not itself *valuable*) when procuring or preserving that thing is not desirable outside conditions of anonymity. Since

agent anonymity serves to conceal the true nature or dimension of one's agency when operating in the public sphere, agent anonymity is often instrumentally valuable for allowing a person to do something she would hesitate to do in public. As Charles Fried says,

> If we thought that our every word and deed were public, fear of disapproval or more tangible retaliation might keep us from doing or saying things which we would do or say if we could be sure of keeping them to ourselves or within a circle of those who we know approve or tolerate our tastes.[xxiv]

Anonymity employed as an instrument for facilitating insidious actions will, of course, be unjustified. Acting anonymously does not give us special moral license to do what we know, or should know, to be wrong, or what we would lack moral license to do without it.

But what about when we hesitate to do in public what we know to be *right?* Some negative socio-political climates make otherwise desirable actions undesirable or impossible, and anonymity can facilitate in these climates what would be rational or commendable to do outside of them. Anonymous speech, for example, has often enabled individuals to avoid persecution when voicing dissenting religious or political views in climates of oppression, as when Josef Ginsberg published his revisionist account of the Holocaust using the pseudonym "J.G. Burg" to avoid persecution. To the degree that anonymity facilitates what would be rational or permissible to do outside of conditions of oppression, for example, but which are currently impeded by "all-things-considered" negative social factors, it will be justified. Since these actions are desirable in their own right, we can justify agent anonymity derivatively and to the extent that it is a mechanism for creating a moral space in which agents are able to do what is morally permissible or required. I now turn to the value of recipient anonymity.

Recipient Anonymity

Considering that the primary aim of recipient anonymity is to protect or prevent an individual from the potentially harmful effects of the agency of others, and hence to increase

interpersonal invulnerability, it is often valued as a strategic form of self-defense. To the degree that self-defense mechanisms are justified, recipient anonymity will be justified in cases where it is (a) a unique strategy of protection that (b) prevents someone from the foreseeable harm they may receive from another, and (c) the value of this protection is not counterbalanced by something of greater disvalue.

Notice that, since recipient anonymity is justified to the extent that it protects individuals from being harmed by others, presumably recipient anonymity would be unnecessary in a world in which persons pose no threat to one another. The social dynamics of our culture influence whether we do, and need to, assume and preserve anonymity. A woman applying for a job in a male-dominated discipline where there is clear evidence of gender discrimination will justifiably seek the guarantee of recipient anonymity to keep her name anonymous. But the need, and hence the justification, for anonymity will decrease proportionately with the decrease in discriminatory hiring contexts. It would be very strange, and perhaps inappropriate, for a job candidate to try to conceal her gender in a hiring context in which there is no gender discrimination. In more intimate contexts, individuals may feel that a certain degree of anonymity offers protection, especially in the early stages of a relationship, when being fully known to others makes us more vulnerable than we want to be. But anonymity that is preserved for too long or for the wrong reasons can undermine the potential for trust, dependency and support in personal relationships. And, since there is a tendency to mistrust those who make an effort to remain anonymous for too long, for the wrong reason, or for no apparent reason at all, anonymity might actually undermine creating the sort of trusting, fair context that would obviate the need for it. A variety of complications are sure to arise in the agent-recipient axis, and balancing benefits and harms to each will be no easy task. For one thing, since agent anonymity prevents others from seeing us as

we really are, thereby disarming the recipients' defenses they are sometimes better off to have, agent anonymity will need to be balanced against the threat it poses to others. And, conversely, because adopting recipient anonymity can be accompanied by the erosion of identity, or at least lead to more impoverished ways of knowing others, it will need to be rigorously scrutinized in relation to these concerns.

Third Party (procedural) Anonymity

When, and under what conditions, is procedural anonymity justified? Since its primary aim is to preserve the integrity or validity of a process or procedure—such as to secure accurate, non-biased results—and since this is often valued to the degree that it protects individuals, one way to justify procedural anonymity will be derivatively, as a proxy form of recipient anonymity. Given this, procedural anonymity will be justified to the extent that it achieves recipient anonymity when it would not be possible or desirable for individuals to do so for themselves, as when trial organizers blind recipient information from investigators.

But procedural anonymity can also be a mechanism for producing or maintaining things that are good in their own right such as objectivity and fairness, separate from the fairness that is owed to individuals. Anonymous voting procedures help not just to prevent unfairness to particular citizens who may be excluded from the process, for example, but also to ensure that the result is balanced, representative, and democratic. In the case of journal refereeing, we want blind review to result in the selection of the best set of articles, not just to avoid discriminating against authors. But these kinds of procedural anonymity may also have a disvalue to the degree that they threaten the cultivation of certain other-regarding virtues, such as tolerance, which require us to embrace differences of which we must first be aware. As Martha Nussbaum says in her insightful book, *Not For Profit*:

> Every modern democracy is also a society in which people differ greatly along many parameters, including religion, ethnicity, wealth and class, physical impairment, gender, and sexuality, and in which all voters are making choices that have a major impact on the lives of people who differ from themselves.[xxv]

To the degree that we are unaware of the genuine differences between ourselves and fellow citizens, we may be unable to cultivate the important political virtues (such as tolerance) which enable us to honour the obligations of democratic citizenship.

I have argued that anonymity, understood as the intentional concealment of the personally identifying features of an otherwise well-defined person, is valuable primarily as an instrument to procure or preserve other things we value, such as fairness or enhanced agency. The justification of anonymity will decrease proportionately as it facilitates harmful kinds of agency—such as those that involve theft, deception, harassment, and injustice—or when it supports unfounded recipient anonymity. Though I said earlier that anonymity would be neither needed nor appropriate in a world in which we were invulnerable to one another, the reality of our world is that there are many social contexts of which anonymity is currently an intractable feature. Furthermore, a certain fact about human existence, namely that we are not perfect, makes anonymity a value we are unlikely to want to give up altogether. In *Privacy and Freedom*, Alan Westin says: "Only those who can sustain an absolute commitment to the ideal of perfection can survive total surveillance. This is not the condition of men in ordinary society."[xxvi] Given that anonymity is practically necessary, yet threatens more intimate ways of knowing others, we have reason to find a way to resist anonymity to the degree that it is possible and to find the best way to harness its benefits without succumbing to its hazards. In the following section, I consider how we might adopt a kind of constrained anonymity so as to meet these goals.

Intimate Anonymity

To balance the hazards and benefits of anonymity, I suggest that we borrow a concept from the fields of urban planning and architectural design. In the 1960s, many city planners and architects were disillusioned with the reality of the modern city. While it was thought that humans certainly can benefit from urbanization (by taking advantage of vocational specialization and large-scale, collective projects), increasing urbanization was outstripping these advantages, leading to individual feelings of loss and alienation, claustrophobia, and a lack of a sense of community or the opportunity for full individual self-expression.

Some years ago, Israeli architect Hillel Schocken proposed a model for human habitation called "intimate anonymity"[xxvii] aimed at bridging the gap between individuals' competing needs for community and solitude. Schocken re-imagined the city as a place that allows human beings to form relations with others at various levels of intimacy while remaining entirely anonymous. On Schocken's view, a successful city is one in which, when exiting a private domain into the public domain, a person should see people around him but know nothing about them. To achieve this, Schocken suggested that we think of urban public space as a series of networks that allow random movement of people through them, increasing the opportunities to engage with others. According to Schocken, it is the lack of random movement that renders the piazza of Saint Peter's Cathedral in Rome, although impressive in scale and aesthetic value, an inferior urban public space, compared to the Piazza Navona, composed of mundane urban architecture of little artistic value. To facilitate the intimate and simultaneous sharing of public space by anonymous people, Schocken also valued "mixed uses" (common in the older urban fabric) rather than

zoning (practiced in post-industrial planning), the idea being that geo-location can, itself, be identifying. People walking in a zoned "university campus" or "business district," for example, reveals something about their occupation and, to a degree, their social standing, thereby sacrificing a portion of their anonymity.

Applying "intimate anonymity"

How might we integrate some of the insights from Schocken's concept of "[t]the intimate and simultaneous sharing of public space by anonymous people"[xxviii] into our analysis of anonymity, more generally? Though anonymity is an intractable feature of certain social situations, it is also relative to particular contexts and persons who can be known, and hence we can have no absolute expectation of anonymity and no absolute right to it; a certain degree of anonymity in social relations is an inevitable feature of social life. Furthermore, intimacy is important for the development and sustenance of certain kinds of personal relationships. So how can we encourage intimacy across a variety of social contexts in the face of real anonymity demands?

As we have seen, there are a variety of contexts in which anonymity flourishes. Some are individual while others are collective; some anonymize agents while others anonymize recipients; and some are standard or assumed while others are unassumed. Since harmful forms of agent anonymity involve the concealment of information a recipient is better off to have, and since a person will likely be more harmed by this lack of information if she is unaware that she is lacking it—as when trolls infiltrate online message boards—I suspect that encouraging contexts in which anonymity is assumed will help to create the kind of intimacy Schocken describes. Assumed or professed anonymity will better support intimacy by diminishing the worry that the other is hiding things that should not be hidden. Assuming (and declaring) recipient anonymity

(such as with anonymously refereed articles) will be a good way to enhance a feeling of security, privacy, protection and intimacy by fostering a context in which those values are assumed. This may explain why distress call lines work so well, not just because people feel less vulnerable to strangers who they know can't ridicule them or interfere in their lives in certain ways, but also because there is a presumption of honesty from the start.

I suspect another reason why assumed anonymity is able to create intimacy in these contexts is because they are, to a degree, mixed use (rather than zoned) spaces that, as Schocken claimed, make us less identifiable and therefore less vulnerable. Though distress call lines such as Peterborough, Ontario's "Telecare" (in operation since 1977) provide anonymous and strictly confidential service for emotional problems in particular, individuals are welcome to call with any number of problems including those related to relationships, work, finances, anxiety, alcohol, gambling, etc. In part because the caller cannot be seen and in part because of the distress line's "mixed use" nature, a caller is able to achieve a greater level of intimacy than, in all likelihood, she could have with known others while preserving her anonymity. I suspect this also explains the popularity of sites such as "Postsecret.com," an online community art project to which people mail their secrets anonymously on one side of a homemade postcard. As George Simmel says of the intimacy and acceptance created in this kind of context: "The stranger who moves on often receives the most surprising openness – confidences which sometimes have the character of a confessional and which would be carefully withheld from a more closely related person."[xxix]

This phenomenon of intimacy with a stranger will be familiar to anyone who has found themselves sharing intimate disclosures about their most embarrassing secrets to a stranger with whom they have been thrown together on a plane. As Jeffrey Rosen says in *The Unwanted Gaze*,

"Confessions to strangers are costless, precisely because the social disapproval of strangers can be ignored, unlike the social disapproval of those whom we encounter on a daily basis."[xxx] Of course, there may be limits to this kind of discourse: one would not want to subsist on intimately anonymous relationships alone, and there may be concerns about the depths to which one can truly know another, even in intimately anonymous relationships. To have a substantial exchange, some feel that you, in your full person, need to be fully present. The Confrontation Clause of the Sixth Amendment to the United States Constitution[xxxi] (the right to face one's accuser) is grounded in part in assumptions about the irreplaceable authenticity of "face-to-face" interactions. And this, once again, emphasizes the importance of balancing competing values in anonymity relationships.

Conclusion

As I have argued, anonymity is both essential for, and a threat to, moral and political agency, broadly construed. Anonymity can threaten moral values and undermine moral powers, but it may also support these by increasing our fullness or effectiveness as a person. My suspicion is that increasing contexts of assumed anonymity, as well as "mixed use" spaces that facilitate interactions between anonymous persons, will help to support the freedom, trust, and security for which anonymity relations are so valued. But we also need to acknowledge the potential hazards of unbridled anonymity and to resist unreflectively embracing anonymity. Furthermore, since anonymity is justified relative to contexts in which it is instrumentally useful or necessary, we should not think of ourselves as having an absolute right to anonymity.[xxxii] Rather, the benefits of anonymity must be carefully weighed against its costs in particular contexts, and we must be willing to relinquish anonymity when it is no longer needed or when doing so favours more intimate kinds of relationships we (and others) are better off to have. We

need a certain assurance of anonymity in order to feel free, and to act freely, in our current society. But we must also recognize that there is a gap between how things are and how they should be, and try to imagine a more just world in which we no longer find ourselves in positions of vulnerability relative to one another. We would do well, in other words, to channel our energies into creating a society in which the systemic causes of anonymity are mitigated for the sake of more intimate ways of knowing one another.

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Endnotes

[i] Helen Nissenbaum, "The Meaning of Anonymity in an Information Age," *The Information Society* 15 (1999): 142.
[ii] Kathleen Wallace, "Anonymity," *Ethics and Information Technology* 1 (1999): 33.
[iii]Wallace, "Anonymity," 23. See also *Watchtower Society v. Village of Stratton*, 536 U.S. 150 (2002) and *McIntyre v. Ohio Elections Commission*, 514 U.S. 334 (1995).
[iv] Julie Ponesse, "Navigating the Unknown: Towards a Positive Conception of Anonymity," (forthcoming, *Southern Journal of Philosophy*).
[v] Abou-Tair, Dhiah el Diehn I., Lexi Pimenidis, Jens Schomburg, and Benedikt Westermann, "Usability inspection of anonymity networks," *Privacy, Security, Trust and the Management of e-Business, World Congress* 0 (2009): 100-109.
[vi] The term "troll" was adopted in the late 1980s to denote someone who intentionally disrupts online communities. See Mattathias Schwartz, "The Trolls Among Us," *The New York Times*. August 3, 2008, accessed February 12, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/03/magazine/03trolls-t.html.
[vii] Diane Zimmerman elaborates on this idea, claiming that society has a "powerful countervailing interest in exchanges of accurate information about the private lives and characters of its citizenry." Diane L. Zimmerman, *Requiem for a Heavyweight: A Farewell to Warren and Brandeis's Privacy Tort*, 68 CORNELL L. REV. 291, 341 (1983).
[viii] Ibid.
[ix] Since 1843, *The Economist* has maintained a commitment to editorial anonymity, running un-bylined articles and editorials aimed at focusing readers' attention on the inherent worth of its content. "The Economist — About us," *The Economist*, accessed December 27, 2006, http://www.economist.com/help/about-us.
[x] "Buffalo News - Web site policy eliminating anonymous comments takes effect," *The Buffalo News*, accessed, August 3, 2010, http://www.buffalonews.com/city/communities/buffalo/article90884.ece.
[xi] McIntyre v. Ohio Elections Commission (93-986), 514 U.S. 334 (1995).
[xii] Ibid.
[xiii] Peter Baker, "Obama Ractchets Up Tone Against G.O.P.," *The New York Times*, October 10, 2010, accessed February 12, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/11/us/politics/11obama.html
[xiv] Amy L. Fairchild, Lance Gable, Lawrence O. Gostin, Ronald Bayer, Patricia Sweeney, and Robert S. Janssen, "Public Goods, Private Data: HIV and the History, Ethics, and Uses of Identifiable Public Health Information," *Public Health Reports* 122 (2007): 7–15.
[xv] Chandler Burr, "The AIDS Exception: Privacy vs. Public Health," *New Ethics for Public Health*. Edited by Dan E. Beauchamp and Bonnie Steinbock. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.
[xvi] These examples are drawn from Wallace's "Anonymity": 9.

[xvii] For a fuller account of the central anonymity paradigm, see Julie Ponese, "Navigating the Unknown: Towards a Positive Conception of Anonymity," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 51:3 (2013), 320-344.
[xviii] I am grateful to Nathan Brett who suggested this relation to me in a series of very helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper delivered at the annual meeting of the Canadian Section of the International Association of Philosophy of Law and Social Philosophy (May 29, Montréal, Québec).
[xix] To illuminate the precision of the anonymity relation, consider a case in which Anne possesses Bob's full medical record but she happens not to know that the record she possesses belongs to Bob since she lacks the information she would need to attribute, or link, it to him. Though Bob's medical record is documented, and hence not private, Anne does not know that the documented information she possesses is *about* Bob. Anonymity, unlike privacy for example, is not a matter of which pieces of personal information are known *simpliciter*, but rather of the extent to which that information is known *about*, or attributed to, a particular person.
[xx] Wallace, 7.
[xxi] E. Diener, S. C. Fraser, A. L. Beaman, and R. T. Kelem. "Effects of deindividuation variables on stealing among Halloween trick-or-treaters," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 33(1976), 178-183.
[xxii] Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, 1960 (New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 2010).
[xxiii] David Llieberman, *Executive Power* (New Jersey: John Wiley and Sons Inc., 2009): 21.
[xxiv] Charles Fried, "Privacy: A Moral Analysis," *Philosophical Dimensions of Privacy*, Ed. Ferdinand Schoeman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984): 205.
[xxv] Martha C. Nussbaum, *Not For Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010): 9.
[xxvi] Alan Westin, *Privacy and Freedom.* 5th ed. (New York, NY: Atheneum, 1968): 59.
[xxvii] Hillel Schocken, "Intimate Anonymity: Breaking the Code of the Urban Genome," *INTBAU Essays* 1 (2003). http://www.archiseek.com/content/showthread.php?t=1162.
[xxviii] Ibid.
[xxix] Georg Simmel, "The Stranger," *The Sociology of Georg Simmel.* Tranlsated by Kurt Wolff. (New York: Free Press, 1950): 2. http://www.infoamerica.org/documentos_pdf/simmel01.pdf
[xxx] Jeffrey Rosen, *The Unwanted Gaze* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, Random House, 2001): 198.
[xxxi] "Amendments to the Constitution," accessed July 15, 2012, http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=llsl&fileName=001/llsl001.db&recNum=144.
[xxxii] Though it is beyond the scope of this project, I think it would be worth considering (1) whether or not anonymity has intrinsic, in addition to instrumental, value and (2) whether a person could have an absolute right to anonymity. For now, I leave both of these questions open.